

## Women command airspace in combat pilot positions

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3/8/2005 - **ELLSWORTH AIR FORCE BASE, S.D. (AFPN)** - During just about any given day, Ellsworth Airmen and their surrounding neighbors can witness the miracle of flight as a B-1 Lancer takes off or lands. The view from the ground has been described as "awesome" or "beautiful," and many of them can only imagine what it must be like from the inside of the bomber.

Two Airmen here do not have to imagine; they get to live it. It is tough competition for a combat assignment in an aircraft like the B-1, and what sets these Airmen apart is that they are two of the few women in the career field.

Capt. Kim Black is a pilot with the 37th Bomb Squadron, and Capt. Bridget McNamara is a pilot with the 34th BS.

While the Air Force has striven for equality among its Airmen, women were not always allowed to fill the positions that these women do now. Congress removed the ban on women in combat aircraft in December 1991 with the passage of Public Law 102-190. But, the Department of Defense policy still prohibited women from taking combat aircraft assignments.

That the policy ban was lifted April 28, 1993.

That was about this same time that Captain Black was beginning her journey in the Air Force. She graduated from high school in 1992 and was looking into options for college.

"I was looking for money for college and a college counselor steered me toward ROTC," Captain Black said. "I didn't even know what it was, but I thought I'd let them pay for college."

Captain Black also scored high on the pilot portion of her Air Force Officer Qualifying Test, giving her the option to become a pilot.

"I've been interested in flying ever since I was about 5 years old," she said. "I would take flights between Denver and El Paso, (Texas), to visit my grandparents. I thought I wanted to be a stewardess back then."

She said her interest shifted from stewardess to pilot as she grew older. During her senior year of high school, Captain Black took a ground course, which is the academic portion required to get a private pilot's license. After she graduated from high school, her present from her grandparents was money for flying lessons. She got her private pilot's license soon after that.

"I didn't think becoming a commercial pilot was an option for me though," Captain Black said. "With all the required flight time to get the license, it was just going to cost too much."

ROTC gave Captain Black a chance to live her dream of becoming a pilot in the Air Force instead. At the same time, the choices for what kind of aircraft she could fly were broadening.

"My recruiter said they're opening the door (to women for combat aircraft). If you want it, you better run through it," Captain Black said.

But it was not the elite status of becoming a combat pilot that drew Captain Black to the B-1; it was her wish to stay close to home in Texas.

She spent her first years at Dyess Air Force Base, Texas, where she deployed twice. She first deployed supporting Operation Southern Watch, but not as a pilot. The second time she deployed was with the 9th BS on the six month anniversary of Sept. 11 terrorist attacks.

"One of my most memorable moments was when we got airborne on the jet and actually released weapons



ELLSWORTH AIR FORCE BASE, S.D. -- Capt. Kim Black performs preflight checks here March 2. She has flown B-1 Lancers for more than 9 years and is currently the only female pilot in the 37th Bomb Squadron. (U.S. Air Force photo by Senior Airman Jason Piatek)

during that deployment," Captain Black said. "It was amazing being a direct part of the justice being served."

She said the event brought to mind a picture she had seen of an eagle filing its talons.

"We were finally getting to use those talons," Captain Black said.

She said she has gotten to use those talons on several more deployments supporting Operation Enduring Freedom.

"I don't think I would consider a civilian pilot job after this," Captain Black said. "I can't imagine me being happy doing anything else. Here there's a higher calling and a reason for being a pilot."

She said she also enjoys the Air Force life as a whole.

"I loved the lifestyle as I learned more about it through the ROTC program," Captain Black said. "The Air Force has a wonderful family atmosphere. No matter where you go, where you deploy to or who you work with, you have that family feeling from the people in the Air Force."

Captain McNamara also joined the Air Force through ROTC.

"My father was in the Army so I had a military background," she said. "I decided to give the Air Force a shot because I wanted to fly."

Captain McNamara was commissioned in May 1996 and began pilot training.

"I had wanted to fly the A-10 (Thunderbolt II), but the B-1 was my second choice," she said. "My requirements for an aircraft were that I wanted it to go low and drop bombs. The plus about the B-1 is that on top of that, it's also fast."

Captain McNamara's first assignment was to the 34th BS when it was at Mountain Home AFB, Idaho.

It was there that she was stationed with Jeannie Flynn, the pioneer for women in combat aircraft assignments.

A young Lieutenant Flynn brought the issue of women in combat roles to a head after she graduated first in her undergraduate pilot training class in 1992. Air Force rules called for newly-minted pilots to select their weapon system based on merit and cockpit availability. She had earned the right to choose first, and she selected the F-15E Strike Eagle assignment.

With the DOD policy restriction still in place, the Air Force could not comply and sent her to teach students to fly in the T-38 Talon.

The lieutenant had made the grade by objective standards but found her options limited by a policy suggesting women combat pilots would not be able to handle the job.

In 1993, then-Secretary of Defense Les Aspin lifted the policy ban, opening the doors for Lieutenant Flynn. By 1994, the Air Force had seven female fighter pilots and two bomber pilots.

"It was incredible to get to meet her and work with her," Captain McNamara said.

Today women combat pilots are a fact of life, and Captain McNamara's career is another example of that. She deployed supporting Operation Enduring Freedom in 2001 while at Mountain Home. Since the 34th BS moved to Ellsworth, she also deployed twice supporting Operation Iraqi Freedom.

"In a major operation, that first combat mission is unforgettable," Captain McNamara said.

She said a lot of the missions are very memorable, but the ones that mean the most to her are the ones directly supporting ground troops.

"There've been many missions where we're in direct contact with the ground troops providing support, and we can hear the gunfire," Captain McNamara said. "There's nothing like the feeling of getting a target from those guys and hearing from them that you were dead on and accomplished your mission."

That is a big reason why Captain McNamara said she wanted to fly a "bomb dropper."

"Growing up in the Army environment, I wanted to fly something that would support ground troops," she said. "While the B-1 wasn't my first choice, I wouldn't switch to another aircraft now. My heart and soul are stuck with this aircraft."

There are still a low percentage of women in combat pilot positions, but both women said that bias or discrimination has not been an issue for them in the Air Force.

Captain Black is the only female pilot in her squadron right now, but she said everybody has been very professional and there have not been issues because of her gender.

"We're all just trying to do the best we can," she said. "I'm a flight commander and have 20-plus students and aircrew I have to make sure are qualified and ready for combat. On top of which I have to keep myself current. We're all just too busy to notice a difference like that."

Captain McNamara said she was the only female in her flight school class, and there were about three women who went through that year, but there was not any awkwardness then or now because of her gender.

"For the most part, you just don't think about that," she said. "When it comes down to it, male or female, we're all just pilots."